

How The Athena Cinema survived COVID-19

By Sean Eifert
For *JOUR2311*



The marquee of the Athena Cinema reads, “Stay healthy, Athens. See you soon.” at the onset of COVID-19.

Photo from The Athena Cinema website

Many things occupy Court Street in Athens, Ohio, such as restaurants, coffee shops and various stores. One of the more prominent businesses is The Athena Cinema, with a marquee that is a landmark of uptown. At the onset of COVID-19, that marquee read, “Wash hands, wear masks, watch movies” and “Stay healthy Athens, see you soon.”

The doors to the theater were closed when the theater had to shut down. That closure was representative of what was going on at major multiplexes around the

nation in the wake of COVID-19.

The adversity of COVID-19 saw the downfall of ticket sales in theaters nationwide. However, ticket sales have started to rise since the reopenings of major companies like AMC, Regal Cinemas and Cinemark, according to a collection of data from Bloomberg Second Measure, a company that provides data sets for economic analysis. All three companies experienced 71% sales growth in June 2021, after the companies’ reopenings in August of 2020. A more up-to-date data set from Bloomberg Second Measure shows that AMC’s sales record indicates that ticket sales have risen 180% from June 2021 to June 2022 for the company. Those statistics are evidence that theaters across the nation are making a climb back to a “new normal.” The same is evident of The Athena, as it has fought through adversity to allow the Athens community to come back into its lobby.

The story of returning to a new normal after closure is one of hardship. Although it’s funded by Ohio University, The Athena faced the same hardships that major multiplexes were experiencing

during COVID-19. “There was that period where you wondered if AMC was going to go belly up, as well as these other big exhibition companies,” Steven Ross, the director of the school of film at Ohio University, said. “The Athena is an interesting case because it’s owned by the university. It doesn’t have to make a profit, but it wants to justify its existence.”

The fight for justification was precisely what prompted The Athena to turn to virtual platforms to stay connected with the Athens community. However, it didn’t come without its struggle.

“It was really hard when we had to go online. So much of our focus has been trying to convey the value of an in-person experience, so when you’re forced to do the exact opposite, it’s kind of an internal conflict,” Alex Kamody, the director of The Athena Cinema, said.

Connecting with the community has been the focus of so much of what The Athena has done throughout its history, something that has never changed, even through closures, virtual programming and reopenings.

“Athens is such a great place to be for support of the arts. I feel like we had it lucky (during COVID-19),” Kamody said. “The community has been amazing. I think that they really value us doing something different. We’ve really tried to make an effort to get the community in the theater.”

During COVID-19, contact with the Athens community was almost brought to a halt. After reopening, the theater allowed members of the community to come in and watch movies with a group of people they had been quarantined with in “pods.” Even during that period, contact was inhibited. Yang Miller, the audience experience coordinator at The Athena Cinema, shared about interaction during the early stages of reopening the theater. “For a while there it was very hardcore. I remember one time we were waiting for people to



This is the street view of the marquee of The Athena Cinema on Court Street in Athen, Ohio
Photo by Sean Eifert

show up (to the theater) and they came to the door. We were like ‘Hide!’ When the lockdown first happened, we weren’t coming into the theater at all for a year and a half,” Miller said. That hiatus from community contact affected how the theater reopened. The community, more specifically community arts, has become a central part of what the theater is focusing on after its reopening.



This is the ticket booth of The Athena, which houses a life-size Oscars statue.
Photo by Sean Eifert for JOUR2311

it’s a more intimate experience.”

The Athena places a large focus on community arts, which is evident by the events that are hosted at the theater. The theater holds film series, student film premieres and so much more. The theater markets itself as an art house theater, even saying so on its website. That means it shows art house films, or films that are stylistically artistic rather than simply meant for entertainment. Cambridge English dictionary defines art house theaters as, “A theater that shows movies that are of high quality but may not be popular or successful, such as foreign movies or

“Post-pandemic closure, our focus is even more shifted as to how we can serve as a community arts venue and expand even beyond being an art house theater. We have seen such a demand for the community arts side of things,” Kamody said. “That doesn’t mean we aren’t going to keep our focus on film. Our place will be and always has been, since 1915, showing films in our community, but there’s a lot more we can add to conversations and to events.”

COVID-19 hindered the ability to reach out to the community and get patrons in the door.

“When we first opened, we had a lot of local older folks coming in. Those folks weren’t coming back at all when we first reopened. Some of those folks we didn’t see for two years,” Miller said. “We’re a smaller theater, so we know a lot of the people that come in. It’s more of a human touch here. We have a relatively small membership base, so

ones made by small film companies.” That doesn’t necessarily mean that The Athena won’t show blockbuster movies, but it also shows independent art house films. The theater has changed that definition and has evolved as time has gone on.

“For a lot of theaters, they struggle if they don’t evolve. We weren’t really thriving just showing mainstream blockbuster films. There’s a lot of competition in the area now that there are two multiplexes,” Kamody said. “We had a really conscious choice that we wanted to do something different. ‘If we can’t compete with these big theaters, why try? Why don’t we try to do our own thing?’ Part of our mission is showing films that, otherwise, wouldn’t be seen by people in our region.”

Starting something new has worked and it’s the reason that The Athena was able to survive through a period that saw such downfall. Part of that transition has been showing a mix of films that interest a wide variety of patrons.

“‘Who gets the movies?’ is really the question. Who gets ‘The Spider Man’ and who gets the Wes Anderson movie. What has happened over time, and it’s really due to the hard work of (Kamody) at The Athena, she started to get movies that once upon a time were traditionally being shown at the multiplex,” Ross said.

The mix of showcasings, including mainstream blockbuster films, artistic independent films, as well as community film series, has allowed The Athena to survive and overcome adversity. The push to make coming to the theater an intimate experience for its customers has been what has seen it through COVID-19. The Athena Cinema continues to evolve, and that evolution is what has kept it going.



The concession booth at the front of The Athena’s lobby features fairly-priced popcorn and soda.
Photo by Sean Eifert for JOUR2311

“An art house theater in and of itself is a special case. Athens, Ohio, in rural Appalachia, having an art house theater? I’m not sure there are three others like it,” Ross said.

The lessons that have been learned from persevering through the adversity of COVID-19 will help the art house theater serve the Athens community for years to come.

Bibliography + Contacts (Not for publication)

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